



Natomas Oral Histories

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Oral interview of

Bob Riggs

discussing the **Virgin Sturgeon**

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Interviewers: Anne Ofsink and Randee Tavaréz

Transcriber: Anne Ofsink

Center for Sacramento History

551 Sequoia Pacific Blvd

Sacramento, CA 95811-0229

(916) 808-7072

csh@cityofsacramento.org

www.centerforsacramentohistory.org

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Bob Riggs was a co-owner of the Virgin Sturgeon.

Anne: We're meeting here with Bob Riggs and talking a little bit about the Virgin Sturgeon. Randee Tavarez and I are here trying to gather some information. Bob was saying that he came in—

Bob: I started working here in 1984. I actually worked at the Sturgeon II on Broadway starting in March of '82. When this was closed, she opened one down on Broadway at 17th. It's now the Jamaica House, right across from the bait shop.

Anne: You were saying that it was closed for four years?

Bob: It was closed from '78 to '84, six years.

Anne: '78? That runs over the time when Debi Randel told us she was living in a houseboat here.

[00:01:13]

Bob: Oh, this was closed. The docks were still going.

Anne: You started here in '84 and that was when it was reopened.

Bob: Right. It's a totally different barge. See, the one that sank in '78, they finally got it up and hauled it out of here to San Francisco. Somebody took it. It was a big wooden barge. Then they bought the Sacramento Yacht Club, which used to be a boat, a big two-story — it was a big boat, bigger than this one or the original. When Sacramento Yacht Club moved up on shore — they have a permanent spot now — they towed in their old clubhouse and they were working on it and someone torched it. It burned right to the water line. So now they have another barge sitting here that they have to get rid of and they hauled that one out. Then they got this one. It came from Rio Ramaza, which is right up by the Sutter County line before you get to Verona. The marina is still there. It was called *Le Barge*. This guy, Louie, a Slovakian guy, he owned it. Laurie Patching bought it from him in I think '83. It took a lot of work to modify it. It was already set up like this, but there's been a lot of changes since — the windows, the bar. It opened in August of '84, this particular barge. It's the third. There is a picture across the street at the Boatworks that shows an aerial of this spot, mostly for the air force docks next door. That was in 1939. The air force docks were here and there was a business here of some sort. You can see a large building and the docks coming off it. It had a bait shop and a hamburger joint. It's been a number of businesses.

Randee: Same address?

Anne: What is the address?

[00:04:12]

Bob: 1577 Garden Highway, 95833. It was Bob and Marge, or something [before]. Some guy, he was a pilot and she was a stewardess, I think — they had it. It was Bob and Ray's, or Bob and Marge [it was

Bob and Dee's]. Gennie [Buller] knows more of the names, the older ones, because she was here living on a boat when they were still here. It's been a string of places, but it's been the Virgin Sturgeon since 1976.

Randee: Does the name mean something?

Bob: I think they were just sitting around and someone came up with the name and it kind of had a ring to it. That is the closest I can get.

Anne: When did management change? You started working in '82 on Broadway and for Laurie. And it was Laurie and John who co-owned it?

Bob: No, it was Laurie and Jack Johnson, and he died four months after it opened. She owned two of them for a while. When this one opened, she didn't close the Broadway one until 1990, I think it was. Jack Johnson's family co-owned it, but they weren't involved at all. She eventually bought them out. It's called the Sturgeon II. It's been closed since 1990. I lived about 2 blocks away. I still own the house over there. It was 1704 Broadway.

[00:08:03]

Anne: When they opened it up here in August of '84, that's when you moved over to work here, or did you do shifts in both spots?

Bob: I did them in both places.

Anne: You continued working as time went on, but now you're co-owner.

Bob: Right, with my wife.

Anne: So, where is Laurie?

Bob: Costa Rica.

Anne: Oh, is she? Wow. So she decided to change what was happening here.

Bob: Yes, she's living in Costa Rica. She's been over there for years and years, but now she spends almost all of her time there.

Anne: When did you and your wife buy it?

Bob: In March of '07.

Anne: Oh, so you're relatively new owners.

Anne: I've told people that we were coming to talk with you, and people say, "Oh, I love that place." I'm wondering — there hasn't been a whole lot of change. Since you took it over, they had already done the porch, or did you do the porch and the bar—

[00:10:58]

Bob: The basic structure hasn't been changed. We just did a lot of repairs. But basically, it's pretty much the same. I put in air conditioning.

Randee: Tell us what you know about the ramp.

Bob: It's a jetway from Pan Am. It's been there since '84.

Randee: Why did they decide to get that?

Bob: They had to get some kind of ramp in here, and there was a guy who made a suggestion, and they worked out that they could do it. She bought it probably for a dollar or two — they just wanted to get rid of it. They didn't pay much money for it, but they had to figure out how to get it here. That thing weighs tons and tons. It's old-time metal — not aluminum. It'll be there forever. It's stationary on land, and wherever the river goes, it's staying in place.

Anne: Was that other entrance the original way to come in?

Bob: The delivery entrance? No, the original way was over here, but it was just a rickety old ramp coming in. Now you don't have to walk in the rain. Before that, it was pretty funky. There weren't a lot of codes then.

[00:14:55]

Anne: So things have been pretty stable since '84 until now? I wonder then, from its beginning, it was Laurie and Jack who started it all?

Bob: They bought whatever business was here. I couldn't answer how much they changed what was here originally. I was in the original Virgin Sturgeon before I knew them. I just came down here a few times. It was pretty basic.

Randee: Is there a way to contact Laurie? Does she have email in Costa Rica?

Bob: Yeah, she does. Let me find out.

[00:17:31]

Anne: Where would there be a repository of photos from here. Debi Randel has some, but hers are just from that narrow time when she lived here.

Bob: I have stacks of photos and could go through those and if I found anything that looked interesting, I could give you a call. I have pictures of high water and things like that. Most of the pictures are just pictures people took in the bar.

Randee: There was that pirate guy—

Bob: He's dead, you know? He was killed in a car accident a couple years ago. He lived on it right over there [across the river from the Virgin Sturgeon]. At night — yeah, the goats would walk right up the plank from the shore and pigeons would fly right into the windows. Pigeons and goats are really nasty; you're not going to housetrain them. Pigeons, it seems, every 20 minutes they go through that cycle, if

you've ever seen a statue. It had to be just funky in there. He lived with dogs and who knows what else. I used to sit and watch the pigeons just fly in and out through the windows and thought, it has got to be ugly in there. It had to look bad, smell bad — unhealthy.

[00:20:48]

Anne: It's a great story though. She's [Debi Randel] got great pictures.

Bob: Of him?

Anne: I don't know of him — oh, of the pirate ship

Randee: There was one picture of him, but they're not the best pictures. They're old from the '70s, with the yellowing, and not that sharp.

Anne: We'll collect them and then we'll mutually have them. Whatever we can put together, it's nice to have the story, the history of the Virgin Sturgeon — who was connected.

Randee: The *Sacramento Bee* has photos and SAMCC might have things.

[00:23:43]

Anne: Debi Randel and her boyfriend Dan were raised in Carmichael, and they were down in the Delta or something, and they had this boat, and they went all up and down the river trying to find somebody that will allow them to dock there, but because of the waste, nobody wants you to dock.

Bob: Oh yeah, they didn't haven't any refuse here. It just went right into the river. That was before the EPA. You would be in major trouble today with that.

Anne: So they were very happy to be able to come here. Now, could there have been a manager named Tody?

Bob: Could've been. There was a woman who worked her — it was classic kind of hippie thing. She was very large-breasted, and she just wore a loose tank top, and she [?] back there, so when you were sitting at the bar, there was this woman in this tank top with a beard. It was a real beard. I don't know if she took hormones or what, but she actually had a beard about so long. That was probably Tody. Gennie would know.

[00:25:34]

Anne: What is Gennie's last name?

Bob: Buller.

Anne: She is great. She talked when we were here before. What else did Debi tell us? She was talking about the sunken barge, buying a barge from the Sacramento Yacht Club, something about Marin, it burned after the birthday party. They had this big birthday party and I think it was for Dan, her boyfriend. It seemed like they were stocked up, like there was an event coming [it was the Virgin Sturgeon's upcoming second anniversary party], and so when it went down, they were all up there because you couldn't sell it, so they were trying to rescue as much of the alcohol as they could. And then, let's see, Marvin and Gennie digging out the barge.

Bob: Marvin is Gennie's husband. He was the dock manager.

Anne: Debi also talked about the goat and the pirate ship and that the guy's name was Captain Jim and his ship was *Black Magic*. She talked about when they had the birthday party, she made the cake, which was an aerial view of the site with the various houseboats and dock. She spoke about an African American woman who lived here who was so nice. They had a group of people living here — Gennie and Marv, Dan and Debi, the African American woman. It seems that this was about the time it burned.

[00:29:20]

Bob: It sunk in '78, and then they got the new barge, and it must've been around 1980 when it burned. They were one month short of being open for two years. So, somewhere in spring of '78, it sank, then they got the Sacramento Yacht Club, and they worked on it and they were getting ready to open it, and then it burned.

Anne: So that was the deal probably, that they were working for the opening.

Bob: Yeah, they were working on trying to get it open.

Randee: Did they ever find out what happened?

Bob: No, they suspected it was arson, but nothing was ever proven.

Randee: We're trying to get some history of the Northgate businesses, a lot of the people are gone, nobody has any pictures, nobody knows where they are, so it's good to get the history of businesses that haven't been around for a while. They get overlooked.

Bob: Well, there was a bunch over here. Right where the Foundation Health is, that was the Village Marina. Crawdads used to sit up on the shore and now it's a floating bar and restaurant — it used to be a little funky cinder block building that was only open during the summer months in the '70s.

[00:31:29]

Anne: It's fun to gather some of this stuff. When you go through that pile of photos, keep in mind supporting documents for things that you told us. Like, if there was a view with no porch, or the bar changed — any kind of glimpses.

Bob: I'll go through them one night.

Randee: Maybe you could give Anne's information to the owner [Laurie] in Costa Rica. Do you ever talk to her?

Bob: Sometimes. She was back here five or six weeks ago. She usually comes back in March to do her taxes.

Anne: Maybe she'd be interested in meeting with us and we could get a tape and she could talk if she wants to. We'll do some legwork, and see what we can find, and we'll appreciate anything you can do.

Bob: I'll look at what pictures I have.

[00:33:44]

Anne: Remind me about your wife's name?

Bob: Renee Hulong.

Anne: We got to talk with her a little bit. We came in the back way and she was back there. And Gennie just doted on us. She was excited. She would be a good person for us to talk to, too. We'll see if there's any other stories that Gennie has, since she certainly overlaps with Debi.

Bob: She's worked here a long time, but in the old days when she was a kid, she lived on the docks there after she was about 18 until her early twenties in a crude little houseboat. They were all pretty crude. They were basic. You know, you'd go in and sometimes it'd just be a room divided in half. They were just little old things. It was a different time. It was the '70s, the hippie movement. They didn't even have showers on their boats.

[00:36:15]

Randee: But it was kind of like living rent-free, once you bought the houseboat.

Bob: Well, they had a docking fee.

Randee: But it wasn't like paying a lot of rent.

Bob: When I first moved here, I lived in Curtis Park and paid \$125 a month, and we split it two ways.

Randee: Those days are gone.

Bob: Those days are gone.

Anne: We've got new days now. So, anyway, I'm out of questions. I really appreciate the time you took to chat with us. We'll hear from you after you've had time to go through that pile of photos and we'll make copies and share what else we find. Thank you.